

THE ROLE of THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT in DESIGNING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT SERVICES and ENHANCING INTERACTION in DISTANCE EDUCATION in TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the socio-cultural context is the key to developing appropriate support systems for distance learners. The socio-cultural context in Turkey is a critical ingredient in the development of Turkish distance education programmes, in which two elements of Turkish culture - patronage and an oral tradition - seem to play a significant role. The main aim of this study is to determine the role of the socio-cultural context in designing appropriate support services and enhancing interaction in the Turkish Distance Education System, namely, the Open Education Faculty (OEF).

The study firstly introduces the technologies and socio-cultural context of the OEF, then presents for consideration the influence of that context in designing appropriate support services and enhancing interaction; and finally provides a number of suggestions to enhance learner support and interaction according to the prevailing socio-cultural context.

Keywords: Socio-cultural context; learner support; interaction; distance education; Open Education Faculty; Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

No matter what it is called, distance education is not a new concept. It is widely used all over the world today in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Russia, India, most of Africa and, like Britain, Germany, Turkey, Sweden, and The Netherlands in Europe, in Eastern European countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania where it has been used for over a century. The roots of distance education go back virtually 150 years (Demiray, 1997).

Rajesh (2003) examined the problems associated with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) adaptability in developing countries in the context of distance education. He said that communication technologies had come to play a vibrant role in democratising education, not only in developed but also in developing countries. The problems associated with the growth of ICT focused upon in his study were the political, economic, cultural, and technological factors.

Turkey has a very visible and distinguished international presence in this field and has one of the best known distance education programmes and one of the ten largest distance education institutions in the world. Mega-universities are schools that enrol over 100,000 students per year. Countries other than Turkey having mega-universities are: China, France, India, Indonesia, Korea, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. These countries have all achieved remarkable success in increasing student numbers dramatically while lowering educational costs (McIsaac, 1996).

McIsaac (1996, XXXI) determined that countries like Turkey with large-scale and successful experience in distance education could move forward with creative solutions to new problems and that this was the time for Turkey to capitalize on past successes and look toward becoming a leader in pioneering learning at a distance.

Technologies used to deliver the distance education programmes in Turkey are typically one-way and designed to reach the masses. Turkey's roots in an oral tradition and patronage system, along with its emphasis on rote memorization and the sacredness of text, makes independent textbook learning less suitable.

Understanding the socio-cultural context is vital to developing appropriate support systems for distance learners. The implications of the cultural context for interaction in distance education reside primarily in the process of design and development and the socio-cultural context in Turkey is a critical ingredient in the development of programmes, with two elements, "patronage" and an "oral tradition", playing a significant role.

Hence, in order to design appropriate support services in order to enhance interaction, it is important to understand the role of the socio-cultural context and student characteristics of the Open Education Faculty (OEF) attached to Anadolu University in Eskişehir. The main aim of this study is to determine the role of the socio-cultural context; firstly introducing the form, technologies, and socio-cultural context of the OEF, then considering the influence of the socio-cultural context in designing support services, and finally providing a number of suggestions concerning how it might be improved.

FORMS and TECHNOLOGIES of DISTANCE EDUCATION in TURKEY

The two primary forms of distance education in Turkey are the Open Education Faculty (OEF) and the Open High School (OHS) run by the Ministry of National Education. The OEF, which has been operating since 1982, delivers undergraduate degree programmes and other programmes to Turks throughout Turkey, Europe, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

The OEF uses printed materials, broadcasts, and face-to-face teaching called academic counselling. The faculty prepares its own teaching materials. Print materials, that is, the course books, are sent to students on a term basis. About 200 programmes are broadcast on state television every year. There are also radio programmes for language courses. When the OEF started, academic counselling was given in 22 provinces.

The Open High School (OHS) is a secondary education programme which has been operating since 1992. The purpose of the OHS is to allow traditional and non-traditional students, who for one reason or another have not completed secondary school, the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. The OHS curriculum is the same as for traditional high school students. The technologies for both OEF and OHS include specially-designed textbooks and other printed materials like newsletters and bulletins, television, and radio broadcasts; whereas technologies for the OEF incorporate videotapes and face-to-face lectures at universities throughout the country. Examinations for both programmes are offered in a variety of locations, usually in cities and larger towns. Computer-aided instruction, while not typically used in distance education, is being introduced into schools nationwide.

Some 400 textbooks have been published by Anadolu University. Hundreds of radio programmes and 2,200 television programmes have been produced as well. Two studios in the three-storey TV Centre Institute generate the six hours of programming that the university broadcasts nationwide every day on Channel 4 of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT).

The university has 81 administrative centres throughout 83 provinces. In 58 of the centres, academic counselling is provided, and students can attend non-compulsory evening classes several times per week. Only 8 percent of the student body has access to computers so 14 centres also provide Internet connections. The university's Web site (<http://www.anadolu.edu.tr>) recycles past examinations to help students prepare for future tests.

The system extends its reach to Nicosia in Northern Cyprus, as well as to Cologne, Germany, which enables the university to reach Turks living in Western Europe. A pilot marketing course was recently taught through videoconferencing at a Turkish language preparatory school in Kazakhstan.

The university also received a boost when the Ministry of Education designated it to prepare the country's preschool and English teachers, a decision which was based in large part on Anadolu University's reach, which will enable it to offer instruction even in Turkey's eastern regions.

To address the difficulty of student access to programmes which are broadcast only once, Video Education Centres were set up in different cities. Two pilot projects undertaken in 1987 by the OEF were designed to determine whether distance education students would benefit from watching videotapes of the programmes if they were made available at such Video Education Centres. Video education, which was planned at the beginning of the project, is a supportive service and is only for distance education students of the OEF.

In 1990, the first computer network connection in Turkey was established. During the first six years, several universities were the dominant users. However, since 1996, the Internet in Turkey has touched almost all sectors, including banking, education, and health. With the World Bank-supported "Project for Globalisation in Education 2000", an important step was taken for the Turkish educational system. The aim of this project was to follow the developments of the information age and to use instructional technology at each level of the education system to create a society with adapted information and technology standards. Through this project, new computer labs were established in 2,451 primary and secondary schools in 80 cities and 921 towns in Turkey. In each of these schools the technology classrooms were equipped with computers, printers, scanners, office programmes, courseware for computer literacy and other subjects, "educataiment" (education+entertainment) courseware, electronic references, video, overhead projectors, TV, educational videocassettes, and transparencies (Akkoyunlu & Orhan, 2001).

There is a strong tendency toward Web-based instructional programmes in most open universities and other educational institutions. Some have already started to offer on-line degree or certificate programmes. For example, Anadolu University has provided on-line self-test opportunities for its distance learners since 1998. Anadolu University has also been trying to offer some on-line alternative courses for its on-campus students in order to understand how feasible, effective, efficient, and appealing it is to offer on-line programmes, and established the foundation for a "virtual" university in 1998. The University began to offer two-year on-line degree or certificate programmes in Autumn 2001,.

As with Anadolu University, other Turkish universities are opening on-line certificate and degree programmes. For example, Middle East Technical University (METU), has several on-line certificate programmes on information technology, English language, or computer skills. METU and Bilgi University, a private institution, have been providing an on-line degree programme called e-MBA for almost two years. Videoconferencing capabilities were introduced at Bilkent University in 1996 and Istanbul University in 2000.

If we look at Firat University, distance education is provided via Firat TV programmes. Some studying is carried out using e-mail and education through the World Wide Web is

one of the university's declared aims. Besides these, there are many serious initiatives being undertaken at other universities such as Sakarya University to open on-line programmes. However, most of these efforts are still at the concept stage of development or are limited to just a few on-line courses. Home pages on the Internet have become a part of daily life at most Turkish universities, but there have been few studies as yet on the usage of the Internet for education.

The Higher Education Council (YOK), a governmental agency, has established a committee called the National Informatics Committee (EMK). Its objectives are: to facilitate academic cooperation by enabling the sharing of educational resources among universities; to increase the effectiveness of education by making use of the interactive medium provided by information technologies; and thus to increase the efficiency of higher education and its accessibility to new student audiences. Beyond this, another main goal is to establish a virtual university in Turkey.

PROBLEMS of DISTANCE EDUCATION in TURKEY

Because of the speed with which distance education was conceived and implemented, there have been problems not unlike those faced by other developing countries. Compared with developed countries, from the point of view of the effective using grade and major technologies of distance education (see Table 1), we see that Turkey is still in the early stages. Turkey's situation resembles that of her Asian neighbours.

According to the related literature, the major problem areas of the Turkish distance education system are the following:

- Limited range of courses offered, inadequate use of computer technology, delays in registration and examination forms, appropriate use of transmission tools, and computer identification.
- Lack of studies about the development and use of technologies in distance education.
- Lack of in-service training on utilization of the current technology.
- Legal and budgetary restrictions.
- Infrastructure deficiencies such as in the electricity, postal delivery, and telephone system.
- Designing an effective and appropriate learner support system.
- Technologies in distance education being primarily integrated by combining only one-way technologies (text and television).
- Despite Anadolu University having the capability to broadcast its own courses via its studios and possesses the technology and facilities to provide local and nationwide broadcasting, current regulations prohibit it from live broadcasts.
- Low participation in face-to-face lessons (lecturing at local centres, limited to certain courses)
- The role of patronage and oral tradition influencing both distance learning and traditional face-to-face education.
- Learner-technology interaction not being part of the formal design of the distance education programme.
- Lack of up-to date technology, lack of programme independence.
- The system is perceived to be inefficient, inequitable, and of low quality.
- Compared to students of conventional universities, students of Anadolu University are not accepted socially as formal students. This negative attitude is attributed to the relative ease of entrance to open education.

As may be seen, Turkish distance education still faces many difficulties. The socio-cultural context is a critical ingredient in developing appropriate support systems for distance learners and in the development of programmes. To design effective learner support systems and enhance learner-technology interaction, firstly, it is important to understand

the role and influence of the socio-cultural context and characteristics of the OEF students.

Table: 1
Comparison of Distance Education
Between Developed Countries and Turkey

Criteria of Comparison	DEVELOPED COUNTRIES	TURKEY
Commencement of Application	Nearly 150 years. First known instance of distance education was 1728.	Best-known mega university is Anadolu University, Eskisehir, founded 1982.
Effective Using Grade	Formal and non-formal education. Adult education. In-service education	Formal education (limited). Higher education (limited).
Major Technologies	Two-way interactive technologies.	One-way non-interactive technologies of text and TV.
Major problems	Reaching more students worldwide. Effective & efficient teaching methods in distance education classrooms. Some technological problems.	Budgetary restrictions. Inefficient, inequitable, low quality system. Suitability and access to radio and TV broadcasts. Use of interactive technologies inspired by socio-cultural context

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT and STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS In TURKISH DISTANCE EDUCATION

Culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capability and habit by a human being as a member of society. Language is one of the major factors that hinder the easy assimilation of ICTs by many developing countries and thus, the transfer of technology. Radio and TV programmes, computer software, and printed texts may be produced in other countries with differing cultural backgrounds. As such, these tools may fail to impress the students when they are used in another country.

With regard to cultural patterns, there are two groups of policy makers. Policy makers can be pro-implementation or anti-implementation. It is precisely the cultural moorings of a society that makes people either in favour of implementing technology or rejecting it. In recent times it has been seen that the culture of classroom teaching and learning has been so strongly built into the psyche of the teaching community that they often exhibit resistance to implementing technological change that forces a change in the role of the teacher from being a storehouse of all learning to a manager of the teaching-learning process.

Guy (1991, 163) advises that, "It may be more appropriate to identify the culture(s) of the learners prior to the development of an institutional response so that it is sensitive to those cultural forms".

Numerous researchers support the importance of understanding a culture and ways of learning before implementing a solution. Ong (1982, cited in Murphy 1991b) reports that Turkey's roots in an oral tradition, along with its emphasis on rote memorization and the sacredness of text, make independent textbook learning less suitable. Ong suggests that, "those who live in cultures with strong oral roots are [more] likely to express themselves in terms of practical situations rather [than] in abstract terms". These types of learners are doomed to failure in unstructured environments.

Understanding the socio-cultural context is key to developing appropriate support systems for distance learners. In her study of the socio-cultural context of Turkish distance learning, Murphy (1991a, 225) observes that, "two elements of Turkish culture - patronage and an oral tradition - seem to play a significant role in distance learning even in modern Turkey." Patronage systems, which foster values of obedience, honour, and respect for authority, are evident in Turkey's educational system through students' respect and loyalty toward their faculty members and bonds of friendship and mutual assistance among classmates.

Traditionally, the Turkish socio-cultural context has been characterized by close interpersonal relationships (Imamoglu, 1987; Kagitcibas1, 1984). The individual has a network of close ties, including the nuclear family, relatives, and close neighbours. The traditional socialization processes emphasize obedience, closeness, and loyalty to parents rather than independence and self-reliance (Imamoglu, 1987; Kagitcibas1, 1973, 1984).

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OPEN EDUCATION FACULTY (OEF)

The composition of students in the OEF varies from programme to programme. In some programmes, such as the Teacher Training programme and the Nursing Education programme, students are already working in their areas of specialization and tend to be older students. In the Tourism Certificate programme, on the other hand, students are typically younger and are not yet working in their subject area. In the Business Administration and Economics programme, the percentage of working students has increased from 30 % in 1983 to 70 % in 1990. Overall, the percentage age of females enrolled is increasing. The general age range of students across all subjects in the OEF is older than that found in traditional institutions. The students range from 17 to 80 years old. The majority of students are married and the family average is three children. Their incomes are less than the average, equivalent to \$1200 USD per year (Demiray, 2002).

The results of an applicative study (Tekin & Demiray, 1989) on the first 768 students to graduate from the OEF were as follows: They mostly lived in rural areas of Turkey; were mostly men; the average age was higher than those attending traditional departments; the rate of graduations increased when the students' parents had a high level of education; and there was a strong relationship between daily course study hours and graduation rate.

By comparing the values of Turkish and American university students, Hyman, Payaslioglu, and Frey (1958) reported individualistic, or personal, values to be more prevalent among U.S. students, whereas loyalty to the family and society were predominant among the Turkish sample.

Moreover, in another study of values in Turkey (Imamoglu & Karakitapoglu, 1999), university students' value orientations in the 1990s included: socio-cultural normative, comfort-social recognition, love-peace, wisdom, stimulation-challenge, autonomy, and arid self-respect-achievement, pointing to the existence of both individual and group-related concerns. In accordance with such studies, one might expect Turkish people to retain their conservatism and self-transcendence-related values but, at the same time, to assume more individualistic, achievement, and self-enhancement concerns.

EVALUATION of the LITERATURE on the TURKISH SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

The literature shows that traditionally, the most important factor in the Turkish socio-cultural context is a close interpersonal relationship with the immediate family, relatives, and neighbours in which obedience and family loyalty take precedence over independence and self-reliance. These elements certainly play a role in distance education, but "patronage" and an "oral tradition" perhaps more so, even in modern Turkey.

Numerous researchers support the importance of understanding a culture before implementing a solution. Turkey's background of a strong oral tradition, along with its emphasis on memorization and the inviolability of the written word, make self-learning via course books less appropriate, with students showing a preference for the practical rather than the theoretical and likely not to succeed without the support of institutions.

The literature shows that Turkish distance learners are generally older men living in rural areas with low incomes. When designing distance learning materials therefore, the instructional designer first should ask a variety of questions about the characteristics and needs of the distance learners. Here, it must be taken into consideration that learner support that addresses learner needs will depend on the unique needs and characteristics of the learner. For example, older learners may need more support in testing environments. In the Turkish socio-cultural context which supports a group ethos, distance learners will benefit from group work or collaborative projects with peers.

THE INFLUENCE of the SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT on DESIGNING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT SERVICES and ENHANCING INTERACTION In TURKISH DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Learner support that addresses learner needs will depend on the unique needs and characteristics of the learner. Dillon and Blanchard (1991) observe that one important factor that contributes to success is the motivation or confidence of the learner. Less motivated students may benefit from interaction with a teacher or tutor. Less confident learners may need more group support than more confident learners. In their study, they observed that expectations for success differed across gender: "the males generally expected high marks, while the females either expected low marks or did not speculate". Learner support related to technology will depend on the type of technologies used in the distance education system.

The second generation of technologies provide for real-time interaction and is exemplified by audio, audio graphics, and video teleconferencing. Because these systems provide for real-time interaction, what is critical is the quality of interaction. The third generation technologies are microprocessor-based, such as computer conferencing. In these systems the quality of interaction with the group becomes important and support systems must facilitate the collaborative learning process. In some studies, technologies that deliver instruction to distance learners are often classified as "two-way interactive" or "one-way non-interactive" (Bates, 1995; Murphy, 1996).

Learner support related to technology depends on the type of technologies used in the distance education system. Learner-technology interaction is not part of the formal design of OEF distance education programmes, but in addition to facilities for live TV broadcasting, research is now being conducted at Anadolu University for the utilization of new communication and computer technologies. A videoconferencing centre has been established to use this technology for live lecturing and tutoring. Using the Internet as a medium for course material provision and communicating with students is another goal to increase the quality and the effectiveness of education. Computer-supported teaching is being improved utilizing the capabilities of new multi-media technology.

Interaction is an important part of all forms of learning. Interaction legitimises distance education (Patsula, 2002). The system already provides for three forms of interaction: learner-content, learner-teacher, and learner-learner interaction. Learner-technology interaction, however, is still not part of the formal design of OEF distance education programmes.

There are various models and guidelines (Murphy, 1996) to enhance interaction in Turkish distance education. Murphy (1996) suggests a model of cultural influences on interaction. Implications of the cultural context for interaction reside primarily in the process of design and development. Figure 1 illustrates this process. In brief, when designing

distance learning materials, the instructional designer first asks a variety of questions about the needs, learners, tasks, and available resources. The cultural context frames the designer's responses to these questions. Based on the responses, the designer makes decisions about the form and delivery of the instruction. At this stage, the designer defines the learning objectives, determines the instructional sequence and structure, and decides on the teaching strategies. Delivery issues include the technologies to deliver the instruction.

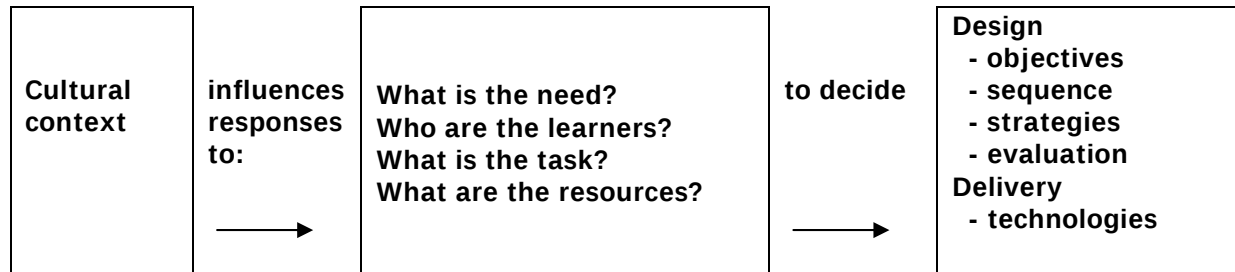


Figure: 1
Model of cultural influences on interaction in distance education
(Source: Murphy, 1996, p. 422)

Turkish distance education already provides learner-content interaction through one-way technologies. However, interaction could be considerably improved by following the above model (Figure 1) in which instructional strategies and interactive technologies like telecommunications, inspired by socio-cultural context, are applied whereby distance education benefits from greater learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction.

DISCUSSION

There are difficulties hindering the growth of new information and communication technologies in developing countries. In any developing country, the combination of political, economic, cultural, technological, human, and administrative factors can play a major role in the growth of information and communication technologies. The growth and application of these new technologies in the field of distance education in developing countries is fraught with immense difficulties.

Because of the speed with which distance education (open education) was conceived and implemented in Turkey, it has experienced problems not unlike those faced by other developing countries. Although Turkey considers itself part of the European community, it shares problems similar to those of neighbouring countries to the East.

Today, two great challenges face Turkey;

- fully integrating into the world economy, and
- accelerating its economic and social development.

Turkey, as in other developing countries, is undergoing structural adjustment programmes under the auspices of the IMF. Distance education is predominantly a government-financed activity and its expansion owes much to the willingness of governments to support it. The single greatest obstacle to full implementation of open education in Turkey is lack of resources.

Although the OEF provides for various forms of learner support such as: learner support and learner needs; learner support and content; learner support and institutional context; learner support and technology, there are several important problems concerning these forms of support.

The OEF, although having the potential to provide advanced educational technologies, still supplies learner support through one-way technologies. The learning environment has been designed for self-instruction via textbooks, radio, and television broadcasting. Video Education Centres have been established to use technology for live lecturing and tutoring. Important questions remain, however, concerning the effectiveness, suitability, accessibility, cost, cultural friendliness, interactivity, and motivational value of the printed materials, radio and television broadcasts.

To produce learner-technology interaction, the OEF needs the opportunity to provide computer-assisted education, web-based instruction, and CD-Rom software. The foundations of a “virtual” university were, in fact, set up in 1998. But the main problem for the OEF is how these technological possibilities can be used to design a media-based support system that enhances learner support and interaction. Radio could also be used more extensively to emphasize learner-instructor interactions. Other current technologies and media such as computer-mediated education, web-based instruction, CD-ROM software, video education centres, the Internet, and a virtual university should all be used to enhance cooperative learning, with the Internet and radio also contributing to learner-instructor interaction.

To design a media-based support system and enhance interaction and learner support in distance education and the learning environment, the OEF should apply instructional strategies and interactive technologies such as telecommunications that are inspired by the OEF students’ socio-cultural context, unique needs, characteristics, and values. Firstly, however, the socio-cultural, socio-economic, and political conditions of Turkey should be taken into consideration.

Learner-technology interaction is not part of the formal design of OEF programmes. Well-developed distance education requires an infrastructure of telecommunications and information technology. The OEF has a moderate infrastructure, very large capacity, and a well-developed distance education system, which is still striving to employ one-way technologies such as video, computers, and the Internet in distance education processes. The major problem area concerned with learner-technology interaction in the OEF is applying instructional strategies and interactive technologies that accord with the Turkish cultural context, practices, and beliefs.

SUGGESTIONS

To improve learner support and interaction in accordance with the socio-cultural situation in Turkey, our proposals are as follows:

- Students of the OEF should be supported through Student Centres. These centres should aim at reducing students’ individual deficiencies and contributing to their learning, rather than introducing courses.
- The number of studies about learner (Open Education Faculty Student) characteristics and unique needs, and the socio-cultural context of students, is inadequate. More research needs to be done about learner support and learner needs, content, institutional context, and technology.
- Interaction, that legitimises distance education, is the most important factor when selecting one-way or two-way media. To enhance learner-technology interaction, the OEF should apply two-way interactive technologies and instructional technologies (telecommunications) reflecting the socio-cultural context, practices, and beliefs, but also taking into account economical and political factors.

- The OEF should organize group projects or collaborative work if possible through a group-based technology, such as computer conferencing, in order to take advantage of the group ethos of the socio-cultural context.
- The institutional designer of the OEF firstly should recognize the cultural and socio-cultural context, the unique needs, and characteristics of students; then should determine the duty, manpower, and economical resources.
- The designer should formulate the institution to enhance learner support and interaction, and select technologies and media according to “Cost, Accessibility, Social-political Suitability, Cultural Friendliness, Openness, Flexibility, Interactivity, Motivational Value, and Effectiveness”.
- The institution (OEF) should deliver the technologies sufficiently for self-instruction of students to occur.
- If telecommunication technologies are to be used to move distance learners from their dependency on instructors to take more control of their learning, then adequate support systems must be provided to support these learners who have been influenced by the patronage system and oral tradition in Turkey.

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